

Locating Alexander (the Great)

Diana Spencer

What kind of nickname is ‘the Great’? And what does this adjective do to our understanding of the Alexander phenomenon? Would Alexander III of Macedon still be Great without it? Who invented ‘Alexander the Great’? Alexander’s story constantly invites us to look deeper whilst at the same time deflecting our attempts to make direct contact with him. Who is this man who has inspired and horrified world leaders, artists, soldiers, celebrities, and philosophers right up to the present day?

Alexander is a surprisingly difficult character to pin down. One thing that we do know is that whilst Alexander may well have been great while alive, he was not ‘the Great’ (*magnus*) until some time later – and then in Latin! The first recorded mention of his nickname occurs in the comedy, *Mostellaria*, a play written by the Roman playwright Plautus. It is, therefore, in the late third century/early second century B.C. that *Alexandrus Magnus* makes his first steps onto the world’s stage. If we think harder about this, it is really no surprise. Two of Alexander’s most modern attributes are his legendary ability to employ ‘spin’, and a canny understanding of the potential for media-management in the shrinking confines of the (Classical) Global Village. We only find out about these and other qualities from the ancient Mediterranean world’s next most successful imperial power – the Romans.

The Roman Alexander

Startlingly, our accounts of Alexander date almost entirely from three hundred or so years after he died at Babylon in 323 B.C. Moreover, they are a product of a cultural climate that had very specific reasons both to fear and be fascinated with his charismatic experiment in redefining personal power in the classical western world. The Hellenistic kingdoms of Alexander’s successors, conquered by Rome, provided one political model for Rome to contemplate. Their ruling dynasties, such as the Ptolemies of Egypt, reinforced their power by drawing Alexander into their founding mythologies. Alexander’s generals, through their connection with the mythical, and by then, deified hero, took a share in his charisma and glory as a justification for their right to carve out kingdoms from the turbulent mess that followed his death. Their actions prefigure future appropriations by men as diverse as Pope Paul III, Louis XIV of France, and Napoleon. It was this initial identification of the Hellenistic kings with Alexander, with deification, and even with excess and an ability to think on a grander scale than anyone else, that guaranteed his status as the ultimate role-model and bogey-man for would-be autocrats. He was a little bit dangerous, never quite fulfilling his potential; glamorous and even infamous, generating a personal empire which was unparalleled for its speed of growth and disintegration.

Although Republican Romans looked to the Hellenistic kingdoms with admiration (for they sought to continue to expand and consolidate their state), they also feared what they stood for. Hellenistic monarchs were kings. Rome had been ruled by kings early in her history but these had been tyrants. The thought that she might again be ruled by a king was a terrifying prospect. It was also a real possibility. The lure of monarchy, in an era of increasingly charismatic and successful generals – such as Scipio Africanus, Marius, Sulla, and Pompey, not to mention Caesar and Antony – seemed to offer everything which an

ambitious Roman aristocrat was trained to aspire to and fear – absolute power vested in one’s own family, to be passed down to one’s son, unregulated by the limits of the annual, rotating magistracy or by the Senate.

Roman expansion out of the Mediterranean took them eastwards up against a world that continued to be viewed as one shaped by Alexander’s conquests. Instead of Alexander’s Persian fleshpots (Greeks and Romans were constantly worried about the decadence of the East, a place of erotic and luxurious captivity), Rome faced the Parthian Empire, and it was a face-off that continued, unsuccessfully, for centuries. What this means is that Romans were first starting to write about Alexander as a (dangerous and alluring) precursor, at a turning point in their own history and self-fashioning as an Empire. It is hardly coincidental, I think, that tilting at Parthia became the thing to do for ambitious Roman generals (Crassus in 53 B.C., Antony in 36 B.C., and even Caesar, with his abortive dreams of a Parthian expedition) just as Alexander snaps into focus as a warning of what might go wrong when strategic military campaigns turn into a personal quest, rivalry with the gods, and mental and physical degeneration.

Livy makes clear that Alexander was still a lively and politically volatile topic in the early Augustan Principate. In fact Augustus himself, after adopting some aspects of Alexander’s imagery in the immediate aftermath of Actium (31 B.C.), dropped him rapidly when the potential association might have become too volatile. Once Octavian became Augustus (27 B.C.) and began to manoeuvre himself swiftly away from explicitly monarchical iconography, Alexander’s unstable image and highly personal cult of autocracy became liabilities in the world of Roman politics.

The ongoing appeal of Alexander

So what was it about Alexander that made him so fascinating for his contemporaries and immediate successors: for Rome, for the Byzantines and Middle Ages, for Renaissance Europe, the Romantic movement? Why is he such a focus for historians, politicians, artists, and scholars today? This takes us back to my opening questions. One of the things that makes Alexander the Great so enduringly popular as a cultural icon and personality-cult is his timelessness. When we say ‘Alexander the Great’, we immediately divorce him from his historical context in a manner that he would, no doubt, have been entirely delighted by! He was a man who seems to have focused his considerable talents on developing and controlling his image in a hitherto unprecedented manner, who quickly distanced himself from a potentially barbaric and marginal identity as Macedonian (Macedon was on the outer limits of what a ‘civilized’ Greek considered cultivated and civilized, in spite of its surprisingly advanced culture – see Mitchell in *Omnibus* 47), and who manipulated his mythic, historical identity so that at least posthumously he gained divine status. Whilst alive, he fostered the idea of ‘Alexander’ as a glamorous, charismatic, and mysterious descendant of the gods, who conducted his military campaigns as if he possessed Achilles’ legendary invulnerability. This is a man who had more than an eye on posterity! Indeed one of the reasons why ‘Alexander’ slips away from us just as we think we’ve found the ‘real’ figure is precisely because the ‘real’ Alexander was not an image that King Alexander III of Macedon

was particularly eager to disseminate.

Modern Alexanders

We continue to find Alexander fascinating and enigmatic because, just like the Romans, we have to invent him for ourselves, drawing on a wide range of contradictory and sensational accounts that are often interested less in a historical 'Alexander' than in using him to score a political point. He crops up often in the first centuries B.C. and A.D. at Rome – he is there in Cicero's letters, he appears in Suetonius' *Lives*, and in Tacitus' *Annals* after the death of Germanicus, he infects even Rome's retelling of its own history in Livy. He also works hard for Rome's poets: he reminds Lucan of Caesar, he gives bite to Statius' accounts of Roman culture wars, and looms over Silius Italicus' Hannibal (see Tipping in *Omnibus* 48). Many authors chose to write biographies of him – Plutarch, Quintus Curtius Rufus, and Arrian. For Romans, he is mesmerizing, but also a warning of what might happen if an empire comes to depend on one man. For Greeks, writing under the Roman Empire, he can stand both as a model for a 'Greek' beating Romans at their own game (warfare) and as a paradigm for the ongoing success of Greek culture. Greeks, writing in the Hellenic cultural renaissance of the late first and early second centuries, can look to Alexander, educated by Aristotle and obsessed by Homer, as an example of the immortality and power of Greek political, philosophical, literary, and even artistic models.

Midway through the twentieth century, Alexander seemed to become trapped in the classical borrowings that characterized the Nazi movement in Germany and even Mussolini's new Roman Empire. Post-war scholarship made some attempts to rehabilitate him as the bringer of a kind of ancient League of Nations (or U.N.), founded on principles of a 'brotherhood of man', but later historians and biographers have moved away from the idea of Alexander as a man who unified cultures, to one which focuses on his outstanding individuality. Even in the 1950s, Robert Rossen's film *Alexander the Great*, starring a disturbingly blond Richard Burton, showed that it was Alexander's potential to stand for soulful, misunderstood alienation and sensitive heroics that could provide the thinking person's 'toga movie'. That film's failures are mostly a result of its attempts to make our relationship with 'Alexander' too intellectual, and to play down the spectacle of Hollywood's golden-age Classical world. We will, no doubt, continue to argue over whether we think Colin Farrell's Alexander (again made disturbingly blond for the role) breathed life into the character in a manner that Rossen's vision denied to Burton. The DVD of Oliver Stone's version is out now!

Diana Spencer teaches Classics at Birmingham University. She is the author of the recent book The Roman Alexander: Reading a Cultural Myth, published by Exeter University Press. In addition to reading Diana's book, you might also like to look at:

<http://www.isidore-of-seville.com/Alexanderama.html>

<http://www.pothos.org/alexander.asp>

<http://myweb.unomaha.edu/~jreameszimmerman/>

Beyond_Renault/beyondrenault.html